Pax

A *The Amazing Digital Circus* fan fiction by
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Foreword

This work was also published to Archive of Our Own, but I recommend reading this version of the work rather than the one in AO3. The site's formatting options are much more limited than what I can do with a DOCX file in OnlyOffice. I'm not surprised at this—they're different tools for different purposes, after all, they have no reason to share the same capabilities—but it's a limitation nonetheless.

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The dim lighting of her room reaches Pomni's barely open eyes. Yesterday's adventure was such a nightmare, she has little energy—and none of the will—to actually get up today. She tosses and turns, trying to go back to sleep, but the minutes stretch on and despite her tiredness, she cannot fall back asleep.

Realizing it's no use, she rubs her eyes and stretches her arms up, towards her bed's red canopy, as far as she can, before letting them fall towards either side. After a few seconds, she sits up, letting out a hoarse groan. She stares at the foot of her bed, barely visible in this light, slowly shedding the grogginess.

After a few minutes, just waiting for her mind to warm up, she gets up from her bed. She stretches her legs, shakes her head, even slaps her cheeks a bit to wake herself up. She's... well, "ready to face the day" is not quite right, but getting off the bed is a good start towards that. Nothing could've readied her for what she sees after opening her door, though.

A white emptiness, devoid of anything, going on for as far as she could see—which wasn't a lot, as this blinding light pierces her dark-accustomed eyes. It takes her a few moments for her pupils to narrow, but there is nothing for her to take in. If it weren't for its faint texture, she wouldn't even notice that this void has a floor, rather than being just an endless white pit.

She steps backwards, taken aback by what she sees, feeling her heart beating faster in her chest.

Skrrrch!

She hears paper rustle under her feet. She picks it up and reads what's on it.

Hello, my little foxgloves!

Today’s adventure is one I’ve been cooking up for a while now. I’m certain it’ll be so much fun and make for such a wonderful time between yourselves!

This one’s completely self-paced, so you won’t see me today! I’ll make use of this time by going to the observatory with Bubble today! We planned this about π clock cycles ago and this is just the perfect opportunity.

I’m sure you will do just fine without me!

Good luck!

P.S. There’s cookies for you all at the end. Bubble baked them. He refused to tell me the flavor, so figure it out yourselves.

“For f[illegible]s sake, Caine...” she mutters.

She’s tempted to sit this one out, to go back to bed. Hell, even just walking in circles in her room would be better than this, but she thinks back to how other adventures wouldn’t end until everyone is done with their part.

She crumples the note into a tiny ball and throws it aimlessly in a fit of anger, before taking a deep breath. She tries to steel herself for... something, anything, and steps out into the cold, white void. She takes in her surroundings—or lack thereof—trying to see if there’s anything else, but there’s nothing around. Even the door behind her is now gone.

She goes to take a step forward but stops after hearing a voice from behind her.

“Why, if it isn’t the jester!”

Great. Jax.

“I was beginning to wonder when I might run into someone else. Good to see it wasn’t the crazed one!” He bends his ears roughly into the shape of a cross, mimicking Kinger’s crown.

“So, you figured out what this is about yet? Or are you just wandering aimlessly?”

“I woke up less than twenty minutes ago, Jax,” she bites back.

“A sleepyhead. Precisely what I needed.”

“F[illegible]k off, Jax.”

“Whoa, you’re feisty today, huh?”

“I just—!”

She can barely even begin her sentence before the void turns from blindingly white to pitch black. A rush of wind

quickly follows, threatening to blow them away. They brace as hard as they can, getting low to the ground. After what felt like ages but was just a few seconds, the windstorm ends.

They open their eyes—first Pomni, then Jax—to the sight of a building wider than a city block and taller than they can see, made of nothing but pale concrete. The building's face is totally featureless. In front of them is the entrance, tall, dark, and just as plain as the building it gives access to.

Pomni looks around, checking if there's more that has appeared, but the void is still there, just as vast, just as bright, and just as empty as it was a blink ago, barring the mega-structure in front of them.

This environment is such a large change of pace from the usual shenanigans, she quickly begins to miss the sickeningly saturated colors that paint the circus and all its things and creatures. But there's...

"No way but forward. Let's move." Jax gets up and begins walking towards the entrance. "The sooner we do this, the sooner we'll be back at the circus."

Pomni snaps from her daze after hearing him.

"J-Jax! Wait up! What about the others?"

"Do you think I *want* to be with the others? Let's go before they get here!"

She gets up as quickly as she can and rushes to his side, fearing he might leave her alone.

They approach the entrance and stop a few feet from its threshold. The inside is bathed in shadow and they can't see what awaits them there but, lacking other options, they step in.

“Jax, are you there?”

“No,” he replies in a jokey, rising tone, the smile with which he said it being incredibly apparent, even in the dark.

She sighs.

“Look for something so we can see ahead of us.”

The sound of slow, careful footsteps bounces off the walls in an echo. They blindly feel their way with their hands but come up with nothing.

“Can’t we have just a bit of light, please?”

As if someone heard Jax’s half-joking plea, a bright light suddenly shines, blinding them for a moment.

After letting their eyes adjust to the light, they take in their surroundings. They find themselves in a large, empty room, the entrance gone from their backs. The walls and floor are painted a cold, executive grey. There is no ceiling, at least not one they can see, only the endless stretch of the walls up into the glowing void, far above them. The only things of interest in the room are two doors on the opposite wall, plain and flat, with empty labels above them.

"So, which one do you want?"

"I'm not sure. Do you think it matters?"

"Dunno. How about you go in and check for us?" He smiles cheekily.

"What!? I'm not going alone!"

"Aw, what's the matter, kid? Scared?"

"You're asking me, Mr. Send-Someone-Else-To-Check?"

The labels on the doors make a sudden mechanical noise and change their content. The one on the left now reads "**CHILD**". The one on the right, "**COWARD**". They're both put off by the labels' sudden change and the words they read.

"I think I know which one's yours, kiddo," Jax says, shaking off his uneasiness. She warily approaches the door on the left as Jax does the right, and they step in at the same time.

They're in a room identical to the last one, only they're now divided by a glass pane going right through the middle of the room, splitting up Pomni's side from Jax's.

"Aw! Now we can't hold each other in a loving embrace!" he quips. She just stares him down. "Great going, Pomni."

"I didn't do this! You saw the labels!"

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. What now?”

“I... I guess we continue opening doors.”

They grab the next doors’ cold brass handles, the only color in this greyscale prison, and walk through.

The next room adds some new elements. On Jax’s side, a very prominent padlock on the door in front of him. On Pomni’s, a hole in the wall, big enough for her to enter if she crawls. The glass that separates them now has a circular opening, about the size of a dinner plate.

Pomni looks inside the hole in the wall and something glitters back at her eyes. She crawls inside, reaches for it, and pulls it out. It’s a golden key, adorned with a beautiful amethyst inlay.

“I guess this is for your lock?”

“How observant,” he replies, sarcastically.

She hands the key to Jax through the hole, trying to not reproach his attitude. It fits the lock perfectly and they move on to the next room.

Now the padlock is on Pomni’s side, the hole in the wall gone. On Jax’s side, though, there’s a very tall cylindrical pedestal, too tall for him to see what’s on top of it but low enough for him to reach.

He approaches the pedestal and blindly feels around its top until he finds a small object. It’s another golden key, this one with a red and blue opal inlaid on its head.

“Ugh, I see where this is going,” he says with distaste in his voice. “A s[illegible]y co-op game. Riveting. Won’t take me a second to sabotage this.”

He immediately drops the key to the ground and kicks it towards his door, sliding under it and out of sight.

"Jax, what are you doing!?"

"Testing."

Pomni's about to rip into him but she's stopped by a humming sound coming from somewhere above them. They look up, trying to find its source, but only see empty walls and white glow. After a few seconds, a key, identical to the one Jax kicked, falls from the sky and onto the ground in front of him.

"Guess this is more idiot-proof than I gave it credit for."

He grabs the key and hands it to Pomni through the hole on the glass. The padlock falls down to the ground when she unlocks it.

Pomni enters the room first. Jax follows and turns to face her, readying up some sarcastic comment to express his boredom, but he's met with a scream and frightened expression on her face.

"Jesus Christ!" she exclaims, stumbling backwards, her eyes peeled and her pupils tiny.

"What!? Am I *that* ugly to you?"

She can only keep staring.

Jax, extremely confused, turns around to see just what the fuss is all abou— "F g hell, what is that!?" he yells, falling to the floor and pushing his back against the glass as hard as he can.

The wall on his side of the room has turned into a fleshy, meaty mass with countless holes, the biggest ones having a size no greater than the rim of a mug. They grow and shrink as if they were breathing in and out. In and out. In and out. Inandout. Inandout. Inandout. Inandout. Inandout. Inandout. Inandout. Inand outInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInan doutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutI nandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInandoutInan

“Jax!”

She screams at the top of her lungs, finally pulling him out of his mind with a shock. He’s hyperventilating, his mind trying its damnedest to bounce back to his usual, collected self but failing miserably. He refuses to look at Pomni, not letting her see his face in this pathetic state, but he refuses more to even glance at the near-demonic wall in front of him.

He gets up carefully, at a snail’s pace, trying to get a hold of himself.

“Tell me where the key is,” he commands with a shaky voice, one he’s never let anyone hear before.

Pomni hesitates for a second, gulping, before pointing with her finger.

“I see something shining back at us over there. It’s—” She cuts herself off for a second, taking a deep breath, almost on Jax’s behalf. “...It’s inside one of the holes.”

Jax stays still for a few seconds before approaching the wall and holding out his hand.

“Where?” he says, almost whispering.

“S-step to your right and lower your hand,” she stammers, trying to not look at the wall more than necessary.

He follows her commands to a T. Pomni has never seen him this obedient before, but she’s also never seen him this afraid before.

“Here?” he barely manages to say.

“Yeah—”

As soon as he hears her confirmation, he rams his hand into the hole, frantically looking for the key. Pomni yelps at this, followed by a gag. The hole expands as he inserts his

hand in, accommodating him. He almost vomits at the feeling, but he keeps going, inserting his whole arm. His breath quickens and his eyes start losing focus, but he's frenetically intent on getting this key.

His fingers suddenly feel a small hardness. His hand and arm have never moved so fast, pulling them out in a horror-fueled frenzy. He doesn't even acknowledge the thick slime his arm is coated in, dripping onto the floor in small drops as he shakes his arm, instead rushing to the door as fast as he can, fumbling with the key as he sticks it into the padlock and throwing it away entirely the moment it's off the door.

Pomni quickly follows after him, looking at him with wide eyes when she goes through the door. He's standing there, shaking slightly, slowly regaining his composure. She stares in complete silence, partly because she doesn't want to startle or anger him, and partly because she doesn't even know what she could say.

After some seconds, he shakes and wipes the unidentifiable goop off his arm.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She breaks the silence.

"I want to get out," he barks. He takes a deep breath and analyzes the room around him, pushing in his feelings, out of sight, and putting his mask on once again. "So, where are we now?"

There's a large arch on Jax's wall, leading elsewhere, and a map of a maze on Pomni's side. Two walkie-talkies lay on the floor in front of them, one for each of them.

She looks at him saddened and decides to continue with the tasks, if for nothing else than to forget the previous room quicker.

She picks up her radio.

"POMNI FOR JAX."

Jax picks up the one on his side of the room.

"Did accounting classes include Walkie-Talkies 101?"

"I was a clerk before getting that accounting job. We used radios a lot. Do you not know how to use one?"

"Of course I do." He holds the radio close to his mouth. "Can you hear me?"

Pomni chuckles at him. She holds up her radio. "You have to hold the button on the side."

"I DO?" he says after finding the button she's talking about. "THIS IS DUMB."

"WALKIE CHECK GOOD," Pomni jokes.

She turns to look at the map. There's a purple dot on the maze's start, at the bottom, and the picture of a key on the top. "I'm guessing I need to guide you through this maze?"

"Really?" He groans at her words. "As if I hadn't had enough."

"C'mon, Jax, it doesn't look that hard, it'll be fine."

"Ugh, fine. Lead the way."

He drags his feet as he walks to the maze's entrance. Not even a few feet into the maze, there's a fork in the road. "LEFT OR RIGHT, POMNI?"

"RIGHT." He walks a few steps towards another fork, going straight ahead or turning to the left.

"NOW?"

"STAY STRAIGHT."

"DON'T HAVE TO TELL *ME* THAT," he quips, trying his hardest to keep himself entertained, or maybe distracted. This goes on for a while. Left. Right. Straight. Right. Left. Straight. At one point, she gets the direction wrong, only annoying Jax more.

This starts weighing on her, and she decides to try to lighten up the mood with some conversation.

"…YOU EVER PLAYED PORTAL?" she asks, breaking the increasingly uncomfortable radio silence.

"DIDN'T TAKE YOU TO BE THE GAMER TYPE."

"USED TO PLAY WITH MY FRIENDS, THOUGH WE STUCK TO MORE CHILL GAMES."

"YOU MEAN BORING GAMES."

"ANY TIME WE STRAYED FROM THAT WE JUST ENDED UP FIGHTING."

"NEXT YOU'RE GONNA TELL ME YOU LOVE CRAP LIKE STARDEW VALLEY? DISGUSTING. LEFT OR RIGHT?"

"LEFT. WELL, *EDGELORD*, I TAKE IT YOU'RE THE SHOOTER TYPE, THEN? IT FITS YA."

"FITS ME? IT'S HOME FOR ME! THE RUNNING AROUND, THE CHAOS, THE SCREAMING KIDS…"

"I SEE… I'LL WORRY IF I EVER RECEIVE AN INVITE, THEN."

"LIKE YOU WOULD'VE GOTTEN ONE ANYWAYS. ONLY THREE PEOPLE HAD THAT PRIVILEGE."

"I TAKE IT THEY ALSO RELISHED IN THE SCREAMS OF CHILDREN LOSING TO A MADMAN WITH A KILLSTREAK OF 20?"

"KILLSTREAK OF 30, EXCUSE YOU. AND NO, THEY COULDN'T HANDLE ME IN ALL MY GLORY, SO WE STUCK TO MINECRAFT."

"...WHERE YOU BURNT THEIR HOUSES DOWN, I TAKE IT?"

"THEY QUICKLY STARTED USING STONE. THEN OBSIDIAN."

Pomni is barely able to stay composed, trying to hold back laughter at the idea of Jax running around like a crazed pyromaniac in-game, feeling more relaxed in the friendly banter.

"OH, THE KEY IS HERE! NOW FOR MY EXHILARATING TRIP BACK." He feigns excitement after finding a small pedestal carrying a key.

He grabs the key and stares at its decorative gem. When he turns around to go back, though, his smile drops almost instantly, his face turning into an expression of poorly-hidden dread and horror.

How did the environment change in a split second, he did not know—it's been a constant throughout all of this god-forsaken day, anyway—but that's a much lesser concern compared to *what* it's turned to.

He's now in a corn maze, with stalks over twice his height and too little room in between to walk on. He feels himself getting sicker by the second just by looking at what's in front of him.

The first step he takes feels like it's going to take all of him, his legs almost refusing to listen to him, stuck to the

dirty path beneath his feet. The second is hardly better. He's shaking, on the verge of panicking.

He picks up the pace, his legs cooperating more and more. Before long, he finds himself running, looking left and right, trying to find any semblance of an exit, but it's all just corn.

It's all around him, the corn. It reaches out, brushes his arms and legs as he runs past in a frenzy, trying to find his way back, now sorely missing the boring greys he was dragging his feet across barely a few minutes ago.

His breath quickens, his steps become dragged, and he begins losing his sense of direction at an alarming rate before dropping to the ground. Is he going in circles? Has he been down this path already? Is the corn growing? It feels like it is. It looms over him. It looks down upon him. Judging him. Mocking him. Or maybe it's ignoring him. Leaving him for dead. Too small to notice. Too insignificant. The corn forgot about him. Abandoned him. What if he stays here? What if he doesn't get out?Whatwouldbeofhim?Willhestarve? Witheraway?Goinsane?Willhedie?Alloftheabove?Wherewould hego?Howlongwillhestay?Whataboutthekey?Whataboutthecircus?WhataboutPomni?What

abouttheothers?Aretheyalsoinamaze?Aretheyalsosuffering?Tortured?Tearedapartbyfourhorsesoneachlimb?Pulledapa

likepulpinapapermachine?Stretchedthinnerandthinnerlikeanaluminumcan?Orchoppedlikeawoodworkerdoeshiswithhi

sfurniture?AretheyOK?BecauseImnotOK.Imdying.Imdying.Imdying.Imdying.Imdying.Imdying

gI'mdyingI'mdyingI'mdyingI'mdying

“Pomni!”

He shouts out in desperation, trying to push away the onslaught of panic and hopelessness in his thoughts. In a frantic attempt at escape, he closes his eyes and runs into the corn, away from the maze's path, heading in a straight line. His hyper-aware skin feels every disgusting graze and bump of the corn he's running past, going at speeds he's never pushed himself to before. He keeps yelling, his war cry the only thing that keeps him going forward.

Suddenly, he slams into glass at full force, bouncing back from it with tremendous force and falling to the ground. Pomni yelps at the sudden noise and turns around, seeing Jax on the floor.

"What are you doing, Jax!? Why didn't you—" Pomni cuts herself short upon taking in Jax's face. The tears that are forming, the pin-sharp pupils, and the genuine horror in his mouth, all such a far cry from his usual mask.

"Jax, what's wrong!? What happened!?" she asks, her voice shaking, her frustration and anger quickly swapped for worry.

He stares at her for a few seconds, his mind still running at a hundred miles per hour. When he realizes—to the best of his current ability, at least—where he is and what has happened, he wipes his face and quickly gets up to unlock his door.

She yells out for him to wait, trying to get his attention, and only getting more and more concerned at his rush to continue when there's clearly something terribly wrong. She opens her door as fast as she can.

"Jax, please!" she exclaims right after entering the room, turning to him. "What the hell happened!?"

"It doesn't matter," he stutters, trembling.

“It doesn’t matter!? This is the second time you run off in a panic! What happened!?”

“It doesn’t matter!” he shouts, getting visibly more distressed.

“Am I supposed to watch you break down and sit like nothing’s going on?”

“Because nothing *is* goin— God, are you Ragatha today!? Won’t you take a hint!? I said it doesn’t ma—”

“It matters to me!” She cuts him off. He goes to reply but nothing comes out. “Do you think I want to see you gone, Jax!?”

“So touching, Pompom, my heart is almost coming out of my chest, but you have to take me out to dinner first,” he mocks, after taking a second to try and compose himself.

“Will you cut that out?” She gets more exasperated. “This is serious, Jax! Aren’t you even *slightly* worried about what may happen to you if you abstract?”

“Oh, here’s the expert in abstraction, coming through! You say that as if it was death. Abstraction’s just... Caine’s little time-out corner or whatever.” He scoffs.

“My bad, I guess all those other people with Xs on their doors are just planning a surprise party!” She exclaims, sick and tired of his backwards logic. “They’re gone, Jax!”

“And you miss them oh so much?” He pouts sarcastically. “You didn’t even know them!”

“And no one will get to know *you* either, if you keep this up!” She points at him with an angry yet determined look on her face. “We’ve all tried to become closer, to get to know each other, but you? What have *you* done? Watch Breaking Bad?”

“I’ve been the jokester! The one pulling the pranks, the jokes, the frustration out of people! You’re trying to find something deeper about all of this, kid.” His mouth shakes and twitches, on the edge of breaking. Not even he fully believes what’s coming out of his own mouth.

“It isn’t something deeper because you don’t let it! You stay in this cocoon, hiding in your room for who knows how long, keeping anyone from even getting close to you, to then come out and be the same asshole again! This isn’t good, Jax!” she exclaims, almost pleading to him to see her reasoning.

“And what the hell do you know about what’s good for me? You’ve barely been here a month!”

“And that’s been enough to see your fear! Your fear of showing basic humanity! What other funerals have you missed!? Who else have you pushed away!? Who else have you forgotten!? Don’t you think this is why people abstract!?”

“Keep those two the f[redacted]k off this!” He bangs the glass with his fist, threatening to break it. Pomni flinches.

“Enough... please...” he whispers, tired and spent. He steps back from the pane, his ears drooping down, and turns around.

She goes to apologize but closes her mouth instead. She meant everything she said, she just didn’t mean to cause... this. So she turns around as well, trying to calm down, but this damn building will not let them catch their breath. The room on her side stretches further than the eye can see, disappearing into a bluish grey haze.

“I’m... I’m gonna go down here, Jax,” she announces. He doesn’t react, staring at his feet. She goes to repeat herself, but she fears he’ll lash out again.

And so she walks. And walks. And walks. Less than a minute in, Jax's side of the room disappears into the fog behind her. It's just her and the wide, empty corridor, without an end to look forward to, without a start to look back on.

As she walks, the walls seem to stretch and shift. She feels smaller, vulnerable, the walls towering over her. She picks up the pace, trying to get to the end faster.

In her panic, she trips over her own foot. When she gets back up, she's met with a door right in front of her. She slowly stands up, scared of what she might find on the other side. But she powers through.

She's in a large office, completely devoid of life other than her own. The overhead lamps are off but the slight amount of light coming in from the blinds is enough to see the pens, notes, calculators, and stacks upon stacks of folders and portfolios on every desk. The workers here seem to be very busy people, and she ought to know: this is where she used to work.

She did not expect to see this place again so soon, if at all. She wasn't *too* fond of wrangling spreadsheets for a living, but there was something nice about the ordered rows and columns, she had made good friends through this job, in this very office, and it's hard to not grow comfortable in the place you stay at for over forty hours a week.

She slowly walks and looks around, trying to remember, getting more and more exasperated at her inability to do so. She hasn't been in the circus for long, but her mind is already hazy on the details of her life outside of here. Their names, their faces—but her experiences are still there, and she smiles at the memories.

She walks towards her desk, on the far corner of the office, to take a look at it, only for her stomach to drop upon seeing

it. Tidy, ordered, empty, sticking out like a sore thumb in a sea of clearly taken and well-loved spaces, including the ones left and right of hers. The only color in sight is from a small handful of balloons strung to the chair, all of them reading "**WELCOME, NEW HIRE**".

She opens the drawers on the desk. All the folders are empty and unlabeled, her work gone. All the stickers have been peeled off the cubicle, the surface cleaned so well not even a bit of leftover adhesive is left. The notebooks, the sticky notes, the pictures of her ferret, even the stress ball she squeezed so much her coworkers used to tell her to throw it away before it turns to mush, all gone.

Is this how they forget about her? Cleaning her stuff out? Not letting even the idea of her remain there? Sanitizing her away with rubbing alcohol? The residual smell of the disinfectant they used makes her dizzy. She steps back, stumbling, her head spinning.

She doesn't stay long after this, making her way to the door she came through, instinctively grabbing onto the cubicles as she goes out. When she walks through the door, however, she has to lean against a wall to stop herself from falling.

The popcorn walls, the step at the entrance, the horrendous baseboards... She never learnt to call the small space between these four walls home, but this was her studio apartment nonetheless, about thirty minutes away from work.

However, it isn't as she had left it before she got trapped here. The bed is up against the opposite wall, her desk has been changed out, and she's never liked how blue looks on bedrooms. The shelves are full of pictures, plants, and other decorations she doesn't recognize. The layout is the same but this isn't *her* apartment. Not anymore.

She frantically goes through the same motions as before, opening drawers, cabinet doors, looking under the bed, *anything* to find where her stuff might be, but it's as if she was never there. Even the stain on the floor next to the desk, the one she was never able to remove no matter what she threw at it, has been professionally cleaned.

She has been gone for a while, or at least that's what it feels like to her, but is this it? They just clear her apartment without wondering where she might've gone? What have they done with all her stuff? Her clothes, her photos, her band posters? Did they even care to look for her? Missing person cases don't get thrown out this fast.

"W-what the hell is going on...?" she whispers to herself, beginning to hyperventilate, trying her best to stay calm. She runs back to the door and bursts through it. She stops in her tracks, though; this building will not let her go. Not yet.

She looks around the new room she's in, her panicked eyes darting around, unable to convince herself that she really is where she seems to be. Her breath comes in short, almost forced bursts, like a failing engine.

This is her childhood bedroom. The beams on the ceiling, the creaky floorboards, and the slightly crooked window, it all fits. But her legs can't take it, and she collapses to the floor. Where's her bed? Her dresser? The scribbles on the wall her parents told her they would never paint over? Why is it all gone? She hadn't moved out too long ago.

Work is work—whatever keeps the machine running—and she couldn't give less of a damn what her stuck-up landlord decided to do with a now-vacant apartment, but her parents, her own blood, doing this to her?

She tries to get back up, but her legs just refuse to cooperate, and she falls back down with a thud that echoes

around the empty room, only slightly broken up by the empty boxes haphazardly thrown into a corner of the room. The floorboards below her wetten with tears, her hands slightly warming up under the few rays of sunlight that make it through the dirty and half-covered window.

She hadn't realized until now just how much she missed the people in the life she was abducted from. Her colleagues, always trying to cheer her up during any particularly hard day at work, her few friends, always willing to meet up when they had time, and her parents, who were never perfect, not even by a long shot, but always tried their best. She didn't have many people that she kept close, but to the ones she did, she did her best to show her love.

So why is she gone from their lives so quickly? After all these years, after all she's been through, they just discard the memory of her like that? Under her gloves, her knuckles whiten as she presses her fingers into a fist, almost glowing brighter than her very own snow-white skin under the sun. An incomprehensible mess of anger, sadness, fear, and even hatred begins to wash over her, and she can't contain it anymore.

"What the f k do you want from me, Caine!?" she cries out, her voice reverberating and bouncing on the walls. There's no reply, of course, only the sound of her sobbing. She stays down, trying to process what she's feeling.

In her tangled vine of thoughts, she suddenly thinks of Jax, and her breath hitches. He's been alone all the time she's been there, and right after what seemed to be a very traumatic experience of his own, too. Did he also get presented with images of his previous life? Rooms where his own memory was abandoned? Hell, what about the other four? Her stomach drops and her heart hurts at the thought

of any of them having to go through the experience she's in. No one deserves this. Not even Jax.

She's finally able to stand up, having let out enough to do so, though she's still teetering on the edge of spiraling. As she gets on her feet, something shines back at her from the windowsill. She walks slowly towards it, a mix of not wanting to and not being able to go faster, and picks up a small, corroded key. It has the indentation for a decorative stone to go in its head, but it seems to have been lost long ago. She recognizes it as the key to a small box she used to store gifts in, but a quick look around makes it clear that box isn't here.

She makes her way to the door and finally, she's back at the long, hazy hallway. She looks behind her. The door is missing its handle, unable to be opened again, and it has a big red X spray painted on its face.

She begins walking down the hallway, back to where she came from. This time, the walls don't move—if it was the walls doing it and not her brain playing tricks on her—but her mind cannot stop flashing the images of what she saw, again and again. After some minutes of walking, this time even slower than when she was going the opposite direction a while ago, the haze has become thin enough for her to see Jax again. He's standing with his arms crossed, his feet restless, ears pointing up like antennas. By the looks of it, he has steadied himself back to normal.

"God, finally, you're back. Did you go sightseeing or something?" he asks, irritated at the amount of time he had to wait for Pomni.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, barely louder than her own footsteps. She doesn't even look at him, her mind still holding on tightly to the rooms she just went into. She goes to her door to unlock it with the key she found, and walks

through. Jax drops his arms, immediately noticing that something has happened to her.

This is all the more apparent when she gets to the next room and can't keep herself composed anymore. She thought she was done back in her old bedroom, but she falls down to the floor again, quietly sobbing. Her tiredness after everything that's been thrown at them so far is of no help, either. Jax's eyes immediately fall on Pomni when he sees her in this position.

"Pomni... I'm not gonna carr—I can't... C'mon..." he stumbles, not sure what to say, and receives no reply. He takes a look around the room. He's used to the glass separating them, so it takes him a second to notice it's gone now. He then sees a wide mirror standing in the middle of the room, and a single door on the opposite wall.

He steps to his left to stand more in line with the mirror, and immediately jumps back when he sees the reflection. Pomni looks like a child. Small. Helpless. Abandoned. Being on the floor accentuates this image. Jax, on the other hand, looks like a walking black mass of static, vaguely in the shape of the humanoid bunny, full of tiny holes, showing his empty inside, save for a tiny red dot at his chest. His stomach flips on its head, his skin crawls, and he quickly looks away, but not without that image etching itself into his mind first. He's hollow.

His attention falls back on Pomni, still on the floor. She tries to be strong, she really wants to. She's always hated crying in front of others if she can help it, believing it makes her look weak, childish, and pathetic, but the idea of her friends and family, already few and far between, leaving her for dead the second she goes missing, is too heavy to bear.

"Pomni, c'mon, get up." He sounds somewhat frustrated—though, this time, he didn't actually mean to—but she either didn't hear him or can't muster an answer.

His gaze involuntarily lands back at the mirror, followed by a cold chill running down his spine when he catches his reflection again, but he can't help but notice—before pulling away his eyes—that he looks even blurrier and full of holes than he did a moment ago, and the red dot in his reflection's chest has shrunk.

He looks back at Pomni and goes to say something, but he cuts himself off before even starting. He was never great at these sorts of conversations, and he's been avoiding them for so long while at the circus, even more so lately, that they've just become harder.

"I can't do this, Jax..." she whispers between sobs.

He has to push himself. Whatever will come out of his mouth will come out, and he might cringe at it later in his room, but *something* has to come out. For her.

He drops to his knees and joins Pomni on the floor, but he keeps his hands by his side. He doesn't trust himself with touching her. He doesn't want to startle her.

"What happened when you were gone? What did you see?"

She shakes her head.

"Pomni, I don't... I'm not good at this sort of stuff, but... I can try. Okay?"

She doesn't answer.

He shifts his weight around, clearly uncomfortable. He doesn't know what to do with his arms when they're not crossed or in his pockets, when he's not pushing others

away, when they're not tools for his own selfishness. So he settles for leaving them on the floor in front of him.

"I don't know what you saw, but whatever it was, it was a trick. Caine, he makes us see things he's pulled out of... who knows where." He does his best to avoid profanity. "He builds these sets to just see how we act."

"So why did it feel so real? The... the rooms I was just in, why did they feel so real?"

"What did they have?"

She inhales as best she can between her tears. "I saw my workplace... I saw my apartment... I saw my childhood bedroom..." she says in between dry sobs. "They were all—" Her voice cracks. "—cleaned out. It's as if I was never there."

She pulls her knees up to her chest.

"I know this isn't real, I really do know. I know Caine probably pulled it out of my head and twisted it. But it felt real. And what if it is? Not what I saw but... what if they really have moved on? What if I have nothing to go back to?"

"I..." He scratches his neck nervously. "I don't know if they have or haven't moved on. But if they did, then they're idiots, because you—" He catches himself before saying something cringeworthy, but decides to go through with it anyway. He'll deal with it with the pillow later. "you're too nice to be forgotten."

Pomni lets out a small chuckle, instinctively wiping her nose even though she doesn't have one. Immediately after, though, her eyes open and glance towards him suspiciously. She never expected to hear such words from Jax.

"If they really have moved on, then they don't know what they had," he continues, trying to not think too much about what he's saying, lest he starts stumbling over his words.

"This place, this... hell of Caine's making, is a funhouse mirror. It digs into our heads and throws back at us what we're afraid of. If you're afraid of being forgotten then that's what you'll be shown."

He thinks twice about it, but he moves in front of Pomni and slowly puts his hand on her knee.

"Look at me," he whispers.

She can't bring herself to do it.

"Pomni, please... look at me." He cups her cheek with his hand, a feather-light touch to urge her to raise her face. He's afraid that he's doing too much, trying too hard, but Pomni doesn't move away. She actually leans into it a little, and finally raises her head, looking at him in the eyes.

"You asked me before, who else have I forgotten." He recalls the fight from earlier.

"I did... I'm sorry." She looks away.

"No, no, I... I deserve it, I see why you'd say that. I've been an idiot. I've always been one, but lately I..." He trails off before sighing. "It doesn't matter. Point is, I haven't forgotten anyone. And I'll certainly not forget you. You're... special. You're real to me. You scream, you cry, you laugh, you're... annoying and loud as hell at times."

She chuckles, blushing a little.

"But, more importantly, you're... you're everything I wish I was. Everything I should've been." His voice breaks up.

He hesitates—this is all too alien to him—but he pulls her into a hug. His hands are shaking as he does it, wrapping around her a bit clumsily, readjusting himself. Pomni returns the hug, wrapping her arms around him tightly, burying her face in his chest as he does so in her shoulder.

"Please don't die on me. I would never forgive myself if you did," he pleads.

They stay like this for what seems like forever, feeling each other's embrace, looking for an anchor. After a bit, the silence is broken up by Pomni's voice, speaking softly.

"I don't want you gone either, Jax."

Jax leans back from the hug to see her face after he hears this. She's smiling, looking straight into his eyes. His heart skips a beat just seeing this, and he can't help but smile back. Part of him feels like an idiot, and he knows he will spend the next few nights tossing and turning in bed thinking back on this, but another part of him, one he's repressed for so long, is happy.

They stare at each other as if they were speaking with just their thoughts. The world around them falls to the background, and they bask in their shared gazes for a small fraction of forever. Pomni then lifts her hand, hesitantly at first, and pulls him in slowly. Jax doesn't really know how to react or what to do with his arms.

"You're not good at this," Pomni murmurs with a soft chuckle.

"Are you surprised?" he whispers back.

"No."

Before she can overthink it, before her brain can find a reason to be ashamed of this, she presses her mouth to his.

It's shaky at first, but she doesn't pull away, and neither does Jax, frozen in place for a heartbeat, like a deer in the headlights, before kissing her back, his hands landing on her waist and pulling her in.

When they break apart, it's only because they need to breathe. Jax's hands stay on her waist. Pomni's fingers are resting on the back of his neck.

"I don't feel so alone now." She brushes the corner of his eye with her thumb. "You're crying now, too," she teases. Jax hadn't realized until then that he'd started tearing up. If she didn't know better, she'd think she just kissed Evil Jax with how red he's turned at hearing this.

"Sh-shut up! I'm—"

"It's OK." Pomni lets out a soft laugh. "You're allowed to cry too, you know."

He sighs, then looks away. "It's just a bit embarrassing for me..."

His eyes drift to the mirror again. He's still a walking shadow, but the holes are smaller now, and the red glowing orb in his chest is shining a little brighter. He has a long way ahead of him, but he doesn't flinch at what he sees anymore.

The sound of a click, quickly followed by metal clattering loudly against the floor behind the mirror, startles them both.

"I think that was the padlock."

He nods.

Neither of them moves immediately, wanting to savor the moment just that little bit more.

Before it goes on too long, however, she gets up, still tired from everything that has been thrown their way. As she stands, she looks at her own reflection in the mirror. She looks like herself, exhausted and a bit tearful. Jax, still on the floor next to her, remains full of holes, but he looks up at her in a way she has never seen him look at anyone before.

She turns to face him and extends her hand out.

"C'mon, get up. I'm not gonna carry you." She tosses his own words back at him with a cheeky smile.

"Funny," he says sarcastically, but not venomously. He grabs her hand and gets up with her help. They walk towards the door.

"I take it you feel a bit better now?"

"A bit, yeah. I don't think I'll sleep well tonight, but I'll manage."

"Phew, good to hear! I don't know how much of that I could've taken." He chuckles nervously.

"Can I sleep in your room tonight?"

He stares at her, dumbfounded, his pupils shrinking upon hearing that, his mouth clamped shut.

"I'm joking, I'm joking!" She laughs at his reaction. "But... thank you, Jax."

They stop right in front of the door. They exchange glances, silently negotiating who will open it. Pomni steps forward. She turns the handle, pushes outward, and they walk through.

The stupidly saturated yellow and red colors hit them like a brick at first, but they both exhale in relief the moment they realize they're finally back at the circus, in the hallway lined with their bedroom doors. They've come out of one of the unlabeled, unclaimed doors. In front of them is the promised bowl of chocolate chip cookies on a small table.

"Finally, I get to see what Bubble baked!"

She runs to the table, grabs a cookie, and takes a bite. She chews once. Twice.

Raisins.

They’re stale, too.

She offers Jax a cookie, trying to not give them away with her eyes.

He takes a bite, then cackles when he realizes what has happened.

Notes

I wrote these while working on the fanfic. They're essentially a diary of sorts. They're not part of the fic, of course, just here for posterity.

February 21st

Jax is afraid of genuine human connection, vulnerability, and powerlessness. He's the funny one not because he finds it funny—or at least not *only* because he finds it funny—but because the moment things get still and quiet, he has to confront his thoughts. Thoughts of the friends he's lost and the one's he's refused to make (and won't make, at this point). Thoughts of all the stupid and rude things he's said. Thoughts of the probably very depressing life he had outside the circus. Zooble asked him if he had anyone waiting outside for him. I believe the answer is no, because he probably refused to let himself be befriended, and has just hardened more after Ribbit's and Kaufmo's abstraction. Is trypophobic, also.

Pomni is very anxious and afraid of losing herself. She dreams of abstraction in episode 2, and Jax points out this trait in episode 6: she holds onto the part of her that's still human, the part that still lives outside the circus, and tells her to let go and fall into an archetype. Difference is that, unlike Jax, who suppresses it because he fears vulnerability, Pomni loosens up, but doesn't let go of her humanity. She slowly learns the absurdity of this all. She's probably the most well-adjusted of the group, though the bar isn't particularly high. Dislikes being treated like a kid and probably being alone. Might do something with that.

February 22nd

If I had to pin this somewhere, I'd say this takes place between episodes 5 and 6.

February 28th

This has turned into an exploration of Jax and Pomni's fears. I did not set out to do this at the beginning, I wanted to do something romantic, the exploration only came as a tool to bring them closer, but I've ended up focusing on that lol. I might add something romantic later in the story, I still wanna do that.

It's hard to get into the mind of these characters. It takes me quite a bit to make Jax act on character while telling the story I want to tell. I don't doubt I'll run into this when I start exploring Pomni's fears too. I actually think I'm gonna have a *harder* time when it's her turn.

March 6th

This is so hard. I'm stuck in the "It matters to me!" line and nothing I've written past that sounds natural, specially Pomni's lines. I've re-watched the episode 6 fight so much but I just can't get anything out. Most of what I've written past that was birthed by "make it exist first, make it perfect later" mentality, but that doesn't mean I'm particularly proud.

I think I can add a new fear of Pomni's to the list: being forgotten and replaced. This mostly based off the episode 2 dream and, to a lesser extent, the question she asked during the fight in episode 6 ("What would you do if I abstracted tomorrow?") and her reaction to Jax's answer. I want to explore this through her old office job, bringing back the same sort of panic she went through in episode 1, opening all those doors in the office, but I cAN'T DO THAT IF I DON'T FIGURE OUT HOW TO WRITE THE SHIT THAT COMES BEFORE IT.

The episode 6 fight ended because Jax walked away, but I can't replicate that here because of the locked doors, so I

might cut this fight short by making the environment itself interrupt them, probably by kicking off the exploration of Pomni's fears.

March 7th

I have a dilemma: I want to call back things that happened in episode 6, letting go of what makes them people and falling into archetypes, Jax's escapism, even Daisy Bell, but I can't do this without placing this fic *after* episode 6, which means tackling the mASSIVE FUCKING BOMB JAX DROPPED ON POMNI AT THE END OF THE DEATHMATCH GAME. There's a reason this is placed before episode 6.

I have a couple ideas for an ending.

A: The last room will be empty, not even any glass separating them, but the doors will still be locked. Jax and Pomni will both be tired and spent, both physically and mentally, both from fighting with each other and from the things this building has put them through. Pomni drops to her knees to cry in exhaustion. Jax has to comfort her to leave. He needs to open up. He needs to reassure her. He needs to get in touch with his humanity. So he joins her on the floor and they talk. Deeply. Not for too long, Jax isn't like that, but long enough. The building will be satisfied and lets them out, unlocking the padlocks to the final door, which has its other end on one of the doors of the unclaimed, unlabeled bedrooms.

B: They walk into a room (either together or alone, don't know) where there's only a mirror. This mirror doesn't reflect how they look. It reflects their fears. Pomni looks like a kid or a doll. Small, alone, scared, helpless. Jax is full of holes that both trigger his trypophobia but, more deeply, show he is empty inside. Then they... need to do something with this in

some way? Haven't figured it out yet. Maybe they need to say something or act in a way that satisfies the building, maybe by admitting to something. Maybe they need to let something out. Or idk, maybe I can mix this with the previous idea.

March 15th

- Lizzie Freeman (Pomni) is from Oklahoma City (per Wikipedia)
- Michael Kovach (Jax) is from Youngstown (ditto)

This is mostly trivia but I might use this, specially Lizzie's birthplace, to give the two peeps a hometown. It's the best I can do given the sheer lack of information we have on this, though I'm considering more northern Midland cities like Omaha, Des Moines, or Columbus, given Pomni's GenAm (to my ears) dialect, which these cities have.

Also, yes, they're both American. The rest of the human characters too. I will not hear anyone out on this. We have characters with very marked dialects like Gummigoo and Princess Loolalilu, as well as Jax putting on an Aussie accent, which implies that dialects *are* a diegetic thing, not just a consequence of casting.

They could've cast Australians for the main characters—no shot Glitch couldn't hook Goose up with more Aussie VAs—yet they went for a fully American ensemble. I believe this is intentional. If the characters all sound American, it's because they *are* American. They might've been born somewhere else, have non-European ancestry (Goose said Jax is Filipino, for example, though they also said he's 25 feet tall and has 7 different sexualities, most of them mutually exclusive, including "Pomni"), or moved someplace else in adulthood, but I fully believe they grew up and learnt English in the US.

March 17th

I've scrapped the hometown idea. Reading "Austin" in the middle of an otherwise locationally-agnostic fic is just jarring and weird. It accomplishes nothing positive.

I need this out before Friday. I don't think I'll be able to finish it otherwise, because I will likely get the urge to adapt the story to whatever new info we get on episode 8, if it isn't done by then, which will suck all my time (and probably motivation) away. And I'm *not* putting off watching it with friends.

I work every weekday and I have class tomorrow night, so I'll have to work my ass off today and on Thursday to do this. Oh, boy. If push comes to shove, my laptop is coming with me to work, even though it doesn't really give me a good environment to focus on this. Have I said before that I'm very good at prioritizing stuff?

Also, I don't think this takes places between episodes 5 and 6, not anymore. Instead, I've written something that works more as a different line of events after episode 5. A replacement for 6, in a way. It certainly doesn't make sense for 6 to happen after this, so whoops, unintentional canon divergence. Whatever, I wasn't really avoiding it, I was just using "this is between 5 and 6" for reference.

I think I'm gonna do option A for the ending.

March 19th

Jesus Christ, I have to rush.

I thought of trying to adapt this to make it work after episode 6, but the entire radio conversation doesn't make sense in this case, because why would Pomni try to hold a conversation with him after such a bomb? She was polite in episode 7, but she didn't go out of her way to speak with Jax

either. Point is, it would take too much work and I *really* want this done (even if not published) before tomorrow at 16:00, so it'll have to do. I'm proud of what I have so far, too, so I don't mind.

March 20th

OH MY FUCKING GOD IT'S FINISHED AAAAAAAAA just need to copyedit it and run it through Seraph and stuffs. Can't wait to post it.

Credits

Directly-used works

- *The Amazing Digital Circus* by Gooseworx and Glitch Productions

Fonts

- Atkinson Hyperlegible Next by Braille Institute — Most of the text.
- Sauce Code Pro by Nerd Fonts, a patch of Source Code Pro by Paul D. Hunt — Caine's letter
- Fake Receipt by Typodermic Fonts — Radio speech
- Inter by Rasmus Andersson — Title page

Software

- Written in OnlyOffice Document Editor

Inspiration

- *NaissanceE* by Limasse Five
- *Silent Hill 2 (2024)* by Bloober Team
- *17776* by Jon Bois (which I haven't finished lol. It mostly inspired the formatting)
- *Portal* by Valve
- The playlist full of ambient and droning music that I listened to while writing this

Beta reading

- My dearest friend, Seraph

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